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SPOT COMMENTARY: USSR - Gorbachev's Speech on Asian Security

In a major speech today in Vladivostok, Gorbachev proposed a host of Asian security measures--most notably, an announcement that the USSR would withdraw some 8,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year, and far-reaching proposals to improve relations with China. He also gave a preliminary response to President Reagan's letter on arms control. Vladivostok

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The Soviet leader's major theme was that the "Soviet Union is also an Asian and Pacific country," a region that is of "national state interest" to the USSR. He reiterated Moscow's past proposals for a Helsinki-style conference for Asian security and made new proposals for, among other things:

- o Talks on reducing naval activity in the Pacific.
- o Security of the sea lanes in the Pacific.
- o A US withdrawal of its military presence from the Philippines.
- o Discussing measures to prevent terrorism in Asia.
- o Opening Vladivostok to foreigners and making it the USSR's "window on the east."

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Afghanistan

Gorbachev specified that six regiments--one armored, two motorized rifle, and three air defense--along with their organic equipment, would be returned to their permanent garrison areas in the Soviet Union, "in such a way that all those who take an interest in this could easily ascertain this."

6 regiments
+ equip
25X1

Gorbachev stressed that the withdrawal, which Pakistan was supposedly informed about in advance, was a token of Moscow's desire to speed up a settlement at Geneva. He reiterated the claim, first made at the 27th Party congress last February, that a withdrawal schedule for all Soviet troops had been worked out with the Afghan Government. Further progress, however, depends on a positive response to the Soviet move, specifically "curtailment" of outside interference. If intervention continues, Gorbachev said the Soviet Union "will stand up for its neighbor."

8000 troops
Geneva
27th Congress

25X1

Comment: Recent Soviet statements have suggested Moscow will have Kabul take an uncompromising line when the Geneva talks resume this week. Gorbachev's announcement, however, will make it difficult for Islamabad to blame Afghan intransigence for a breakdown in the talks--even if Kabul fails to offer a substantially reduced timetable--and is likely to

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increase both international and domestic pressure on Pakistan to demonstrate flexibility at Geneva. [redacted]

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While the three air defense regiments to be withdrawn have little combat value, the other regiments perform valuable combat and security functions. The only tank regiment, at Shindand, helps to guard Soviet garrisons and patrol lines of communication. The motorized-rifle regiments to be withdrawn are likely to be units that see little active combat and are involved in security duties that could be covered by reassigning other forces. [redacted]

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Verification

China

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Gorbachev showed major new flexibility on most of the security issues dividing the USSR and China. He stated:

- o Soviet and Mongolian leaders are examining the question of removing "a substantial part" of the approximately 60,000 Soviet troops in Mongolia.
- o The USSR is ready to discuss with China "concrete steps" to reduce conventional forces along the Sino-Soviet border.
- o The official border in the Amur river--long a contentious issue--might pass along the main ship channel. [redacted]

- Mongolia
- border forces
- border

25X1

Comment: These are the most far-reaching proposals toward bettering relations with China a Soviet leader has made in public since the Sino-Soviet split. No Soviet leader has ever publicly stated that Moscow was considering reducing its forces in Mongolia--there since 1966--or spoken specifically about a willingness to discuss reducing conventional forces along the Sino-Soviet border. Gorbachev probably had to overcome skepticism among the Soviet military about the benefits to the USSR of taking such steps. [redacted]

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Gorbachev's comments on the Amur border reflect a longstanding Soviet position [redacted] have never been stated in public by a Soviet leader and probably are intended to show general Soviet flexibility on the issue. His formulation, however, leaves the "main shipping channel" undefined, which is the crux of the issue--particularly with regard to an important island opposite Khabarovsk. [redacted]

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The border proposals and the withdrawal of some forces from Afghanistan are aimed at addressing two of China's "three obstacles" to improved Sino-Soviet relations. On the third, however, Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, Gorbachev hinted that a solution depends primarily on China's normalizing relations with Vietnam--a formulation that rules out Soviet pressure on Hanoi to withdraw. [redacted]

2/3
(Vietnam remains)

25X1

United States

25X1

25X1

~~Gorbachev said he would study the President's letter and treat it with "responsibility and attention."~~ What mattered most, he said, was whether the proposals in the letter met the conditions of "equal security," asserting that the USSR would determine its further steps accordingly. While claiming that he favored a summit, the Soviet leader asserted that the accords reached at the last Geneva meeting should not be interpreted only as a promise to have more meetings. [REDACTED]

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Comment: Gorbachev's linkage of the content of the President's letter to future Soviet actions suggest that it could play a key role in Moscow's deliberations on the summit. His caveat on what was agreed to at Geneva with respect to future summits appears to lay the groundwork for denying any future US allegations that he reneged on his agreement to hold another summit. [REDACTED]

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Next 5 Page(s) In Document Denied